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FROM U.S. MISSION TO THE UN AGENCIES IN ROME

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SUBJECT: AGRICULTURAL BIOTECHNOLOGY ACTIVITY IN AFRICA:
USAID/REDSO MEETINGS WITH FAO, WFP AND HOLY SEE

REF: 04 ROME 002436

1. Summary: USUN-Rome arranged for Dr. Michael Hall, Regional Biotechnology Advisor for USAID's Regional Economic Development Services Office (REDSO) based in Nairobi, Kenya, to meet with representatives at FAO and WFP. Hall also met with an official from the Holy See (to be covered in septel from Embassy Vatican). Dr. Hall briefed these agencies on USG-supported efforts to develop Africa-focused a) agricultural biotechnology research; b) national policies and regulatory infrastructure for biosafety and intellectual property; and c) greater public awareness on agricultural biotechnology. FAO currently supports the dissemination of agricultural biotechnology (ag biotech) in Africa in a variety of ways and is seeking resources to continue this work, and WFP has well-defined policies in place to accommodate genetically modified (GM) commodities for food aid procurement and delivery in African countries. USUN Rome recommends that USAID consider options for closer collaboration with FAO's efforts on ag biotech in Africa. End summary.

2. Dr. Hall updated FAO and WFP representatives on ag biotech projects throughout the REDSO-supported countries in Eastern and Southern Africa. He described REDSO's work with regional institutions such as Association for Strengthening Agricultural Research in Eastern and Central Africa (ASARECA) and the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA), as well as with national governments and NGOs in East and Southern African regions to develop ag biotech activities in support of USAID strategic objectives on agriculture and trade. REDSO is supporting ag biotech research for the eventual protection of important African staple foods, (e.g. mosaic virus resistant cassava in East and Southern Africa, fungus and nematode resistant highland bananas in Uganda, maize resistant to post harvest pests in Kenya, and livestock vaccines in Kenya). In addition to these long-term research efforts, REDSO supports the design and implementation of locally appropriate regulatory systems for ag biotech. REDSO is trying to address myths and misconceptions about ag biotech by providing accurate and complete information to key stakeholders in policy, media and government.

FAO

3. Per reftel, FAO has explicitly addressed the use of ag biotech to meet the needs of developing countries in the latest edition of the State of the Food and Agriculture (SOFA 2003-2004) Report. FAO has chosen ag biotech as one of its Priority Areas for Interdisciplinary Action (PAIA), has an ag biotech website that receives 30,000 visits per month in five languages (Arabic, Chinese, English, French and Spanish), hosts a 2000-member electronic "Biotechnology in Food and Agriculture Forum," and has launched a searchable database providing information on crop biotechnology products and techniques in use or in the pipeline in developing countries. Using some U.S. arrears funds, FAO's Crop and Grasslands Services (AGPC) launched an Africa Biotechnology Information Network (ABIN) in 2004 to assist information exchange for the use of biotechnology applications to support food security and poverty alleviation among smallholder farmers, but funds will run out by the end of this year.

4. FAO has technical and support functions dealing with the practical aspects of handling genetically modified (GM) seeds, crops and feeds in Kenya and Swaziland (projects are also in development for Benin, Tanzania and Uganda). As part of a global assessment of plant breeding and biotechnology, FAO has surveyed 20 African nations and organized two African-based workshops in 2004 to address expressed needs and demands. FAO has provided technical

training for GM seed testing and variety verification in collaboration with the International Seed Testing Association in Egypt and South Africa. FAO's searchable database inventory of state-of-the-art biotechnology products, GMOs and techniques has contributors from 20 African countries. Based on these activities, several of which seem to complement the ongoing work of USAID in the region, FAO staff suggested there might be opportunities

for closer cooperation with REDSO in the future.

WFP

15. Dr. Hall updated representatives of WFP's Office of Communications on a REDSO supported regional biosafety development activity for COMESA that includes reviewing food aid procurement and distribution in East and Southern Africa with respect to GM grains. Dr. Hall obtained data from WFP on food procurement in the region to aid the analytical phase of this activity. The discussion with WFP established that the organization is well informed on current trends in GM production and has consistent policies in place that respect government regulations on GM commodities for both supplier and recipient countries. These policies reduce the potential for recurrence of the 2002 Zambia and Zimbabwe scenario for dislocations resulting from unanticipated rejections of GM food aid commodities.

Conclusion

16. FAO has made efforts to expand information about and access to ag biotech in African countries and needs additional resources to continue this work. FAO has expressed interest in collaboration with/support from REDSO. USUN Rome recommends that USAID and other US Government agencies consider providing support for collaboration between REDSO and FAO for the dissemination of ag biotech in Africa.

HALL

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